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ABSTRACT

Principals are middle managers. Board members should have a superintendent who has a high regard for the principalship and who believes in the total team approach to school administration. They should allow principals to do the job they were hired to do--parental or citizen complaints should be referred to the principal instead of being personally acted upon by board members. Probably the most sensitive area other than school discipline is extracurricular activities. Complaints in this area should not be blown out of proportion. Principals need help and support in instructional leadership. Board members should let their principals know that they are as interested in English as they are in basketball. Principals should be included in contract negotiations and collective bargaining. The information and insight they can provide can be extremely helpful. Board policies should be written in a very broad way in order to take advantage of the expertise and judgment which principals can bring to bear in individual situations. Principals should be involved in the selection of staff members. They should be allowed input and access to the board on an equal footing with other groups such as teacher unions. (DC)

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"HOW TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF YOUR PRINCIPALS"

Once in a while I enjoy reading the comic strip Peanuts. particularly remember one that went something like this. In the first frame, Linus climbed up on his box, faced to the left, with his arms folded like this. In the second frame he faced to the right, with his arms folded like this. In the third frame, he stood on his box, faced the front, and said "I think I could be a high school principal". Now we principals would say that is grossly over-simplified. But it is sort of an occupational hazard. Many times you will see the high school principal, standing at the end of the gym or in the hall, looking very official, with his arms crossed. I hope that is not the image you have of your principal.

When I was asked to address the subject of "How to make the best use of your principals" I couldn't wait to start writing this speech. I thought, boy, here is my chance to really tell board members what is on my mind. But as I got down to the real business

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of outlining what I wanted to say, it became one of the toughest speaking assignments I have ever had. It became difficult to delineate between relationships, and I began to think a better topic would have been "How to get the most out of your principal" or "How to make the principal's job easier" or "How to help your principal have a better school". I'm not sure I am really getting to the assigned subject but if I am not on target your reactors can bring me into focus during the reaction period.

Now I will be speaking from the perspective of over twenty-five years as a high school principal and I find that I usually refer to the principal in the male gender. I do not intend to omit elementary and middle level principals, or the many great ladies in school administration, but it's just easier for me to handle this way. Over these years I have had the privilege of working with a great many people who have served as members of boards of education. I have fervently admired those people; serving on the school board is one of the most thankless jobs in public service. I have not always agreed with them; but then, some of them have not always agreed with me, so I really don't have much problem with that.

First I would like to tell you a few things about the principal-ship; things you probably already know, but pertinent to my discussion. Principals are considered in the profession as middle

management. We are the people in the middle on so many occasions - between the superintendent and the teachers, between the teachers and the students; between the parents and the teachers; and some times even between the parents and their kids. We implement the policies, the programs, the procedures of the superintendent and the board of education. We walk an educational tightrope every day. We are eyeball to eyeball with students, teachers, and parents on a daily basis. We are where the action is. The high school principalship is universally regarded as the toughest job in school administration. It is a very visible position because most communities rally around their high schools. Your principal is a fiercely dedicated individual. He probably spends more time on the job than any other employee. Time to your principal is a very precious commodity. Yet most of my colleagues will agree with me as I say that the principalship is the most demanding, most rewarding and most exciting job in school administration.

There is a very delicate relationship between a principal and a board member. Most all principals have a healthy respect for the chain of command or the line-staff relationship. I feel that I am responsible to and report to the superintendent of schools or his designated assistant. So a major step in making the best use of your principal may well be to have a superintendent who has a high regard for the principalship and who believes in the total team approach to school administration. We as principals are well aware of the fact that individual board members have no legal

authority. We are also aware of the political implications, good and bad, of the kinds of relationships we have with board members on an individual basis. We as principals earnestly desire an open, comfortable, caring and concerned relationship with board members individually and collectively. It is in the best interests of the public not to have its professional staff too dependent upon public favor. When necessary or unpopular recommendations must be made, the public must know that their professionals will not hesitate to make them.

Some things I could say about how to make the best use of your principal are obvious, hackneyed and mundane. I could say hire a good person, pay him lots of money, hire a sufficient number of capable teachers, give him a good building with an unlimited budget and turn him loose. I won't dwell on these, however, except to say that the employment of the right person is a most essential prerequisite. Usually when we hire a new superintendent, the board goes on what is called a nationwide search. I never hear that much when a district is looking for a high school principal. But it is a very important position and deserves considerable attention in the process of employment. But this does lead me to my first real point. Let the principal do the job you employed him to do.

Let me elaborate. Board members are extremely conscientious people and usually take their responsibility to the public very

seriously. You would be an unusual board member if you have not had a call from a parent complaining about something that has happened at the school house. We know you have to listen. And that parent usually wants your reaction. And wants it right now. You are in a delicate position. But it's extremely important at that point in time that you refrain from being judgmental. As Sargeant Friday used to say on Dragnet, "Just the facts, ma'am". In my opinion the first question you should ask is "Have you talked to your principal?" And if they haven't, I should think your would insist that they do, and indicate that you aren't going to do anything with the problem until that step is completed. I could only hazard a guess as to the number of times a parent has called me and started off with the comment that "I have just talked to a member of the board of education and he said thus and so". Now that isn't always the truth, but if you as a board member get into the act, simple problems sometimes get overly complicated, and sometimes my options for handling the problem are reduced. There are times, however, that I have greatly appreciated a board member who has called to alert me to a problem and provided me with some insight into it. But principals are rather used to dealing with problems in a pressure situation. We don't like it, but it goes with the territory. It's easier for me to say "No" than it is for you. I would urge you to enforce the general procedure of working through the chain of command in handling parental or citizen complaints about staff or administrators.

One of the things you hate to hear is that there is a big problem down at the school house. Let me try to put the number of school house problems in perspective. We have 1300 students at North Kansas City High School. There are about 105 adults - teachers, custodians, secretaries, and so on. Each student has a classroom interaction with six teachers a day. Simple multiplication on those figures gives you 7800 chances a day for a problem. Now if you want to carry that to an extreme, mathematically extrapolate the interaction of 1300 kids with each other and with over 100 adults and you get an astronomical figure. You have two kids in your family at home and I will bet you rarely get through a day without a spat of some kind. To go through a school day without a single problem would be the eighth wonder of the world.

Other than school discipline, probably the most sensitive area of the total program is activities - athletics, music, and the many other things. I've had four gut-wrenching problems this year in that arena. I've had only passing discussion about English or math or social studies. I dread the spring of the year. Cheerleader and pompon elections. Or the lead in the spring musical. They're the worst. It's difficult to be objective and unbiased when you're daughter doesn't win a spot on the cheerleading team. It is a time of high anxiety in the schoolhouse. Despite the most carefully laid procedures for such elections, rarely do we escape without a complaint. I'm sorry to say folks, that parents get much more bent out of shape in these kinds of things than the

kids do. Kids suffer, but recover pretty fast. These complaints many times reach members of the board. My suggestion to you is to maintain a very low profile. Some things to remember. Everybody cannot have everything they want. If one is not elected, someone else was. That person is happy. In athletics on any given night half the teams lose. You'd rather it wasn't yours, but the world still keeps turning. You can make the best use of your principal by trying to minimize some of these kinds of things, as important as they may seem, because these kinds of issues can get so blown out of proportion and occupy so much teacher and administrative time, that the instructional program can be severely neglected.

In the areas of curriculum and instruction your principal needs help. Principals like to think of themselves as instructional leaders. However, I fear that the development of curriculum and the improvement of instruction may not be the strongest suit of many principals. The myriad of management details that accompany building administration claims a vast amount of the principal's time. We're constantly putting out brushfires around the schoolhouse, and it is difficult to set aside those things and think about the most important reason we're in the schoolhouse - a child's basic education. To really do significant and meaningful work in curriculum and instruction requires blocks of time. It can be put off, placed on the back burner. I don't know as this addresses the question of how to make the best use of your principal, but you will get the best education for your children

if you can provide your principal with the necessary resources and people to do curriculum planning. You can get the best out of your principal if he knows that you as a board member are just as interested in English as you are in basketball. You can get the best out of your principal if the mission of the school is defined as clearly as possible. I think our major problem in education today is really knowing what the schools should do, and for whom. Clarifying that issue will take some educational statesmanship on the part of the entire educational community because in any real analysis of it, I think we would find that there are some other agencies that can do a better job at some things than the schools can. Curriculum development may best be done by committees working during the summer but the building principal should be included in the overall planning process.

We sometimes hear of long hot summers but in education it is the spring that is long and hot. That is the time in most school districts when contract negotiations or collective bargaining is taking place. I fear that the building principal is many times the forgotten person in the negotiations process. Over the years the authority of the building principal has been seriously eroded through negotiated contracts. I feel that the principal must be a part of the bargaining process, whether formally or informally. There are certainly many parts of a contract that are clearly a matter of general district policy, but those elements that affect the instructional and management programs of the building

are of real concern to your principal. The principal will be the first line administrator in many cases. In my opinion the machinery has to be developed so that the principal has significant input into what goes on at the table. Even though I have mentioned earlier that the principal is the man in the middle, when the chips are down he is management, and no principal should fail to remember that. In some districts, a principal is appointed to the board's negotiating team. His main function is that of a consultant. He may not say a word at the table. But he's in the caucuses and planning stages. This is not always a desirable approach. I have had this experience and it worked out fine, except that conversation would sometimes stop if I walked into the teachers' lounge. If a district does not choose to have a building principal on the negotiating team, then there most assuredly should be a procedure for principals to review the proposed packages and present their evaluation of them. This may be through meetings with the central administrative staff, or through some kind of forum with the board of education. Given the sunshine laws and the restrictions on executive sessions, the former approach may be the best that can be done. But the point is, the information and insight that a building administrator can provide can be extremely helpful. I could cite to you occasions where the concerns of the central administration did not seem to be a problem in the view of building principals and vice versa.

I would follow that with a point or two on board of education policies. In recent years, district policy handbooks seem to have double in size. I would not say this is bad, but sometimes it's not good. As far as I am concerned, a board policy is a law that I must follow when I administer our building. I have no flexibility. If I fail to follow a board policy, particularly if I have full knowledge of that policy, than I am subject to reprimand in the least, and dismissal at worst. We are in the people business, and policies, rules and regulations, simply cannot be written to cover every situation. We do need to be consistent, but there is a saying that "nothing is so inconsistent as consistency". Especially when we're dealing with people. It is much easier to administer a schoolhouse if there are rules for everything. No judgments have to be made, all that needs to be done is to go by the books. But then you don't really need a high paid principal with a doctors degree; you only need one who can read and interpret the rules. I think you get the best use of your principal when policies are written in a very broad way. I have no real apprehension about my responsibility to make judgments regarding a given situation. Surely I must take into account all the facets surrounding the problem, past precedents, impact on other things, and bring to bear on that problem all the information and resources available to render an intelligent judgment and course of action. I also have faith in our teachers to make judgments. Board policies, once on the books, are difficult to change. Perhaps more than any group in school administration, we

are dependent upon clarity of policy and consistency of policy development. No policy is better than a bad policy. Implement a procedure for systematically involving principals on matters of policy. This procedure should solicit suggestions from them prior to any implementation of policy.

One or two final points. In so far as practical, the principal should be involved in the selection of staff members. I am able to accept with complete understanding the transfer of staff members within the district because of enrollment decline or when staff adjustments must be made. But when new teachers are employed specifically for our building, I think I should have some input. That new teacher is going to be under my supervision and it's not only important that we are compatable, but that the teacher knows I had some part in the selection.

And finally I urge you to preserve the integrity and independence of educational middle management. I know of too many cases where principals have less access to the board and less input into board decisions than any other group. Teachers too often have a board member's ear and PAC support of some board members has earned teacher's unions an open road directly to the board room. I'm sorry to say that this places principals in untenable positions on many occasions and severely compromises our authority. To insure the best use of your principals, we must be provided opportunity for dialogue on critical issues.